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SUBJECT: COMOROS WELCOMES IRANIAN PRESIDENT AHMEDINEJAD

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Thousands of moderate Sunni Comorans saw no contradiction in turning out to enthusiastically welcome Shi'a Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, to the Comoros February 25. Comorans are pro-American, eagerly asking that we reopen our Embassy and Peace Corps program. After years of "cooperation," Iran has offered little beyond promises and a derelict fishing boat (REFTEL). Many Comorans criticize Sambi, nicknamed "Ayatollah" because he studied in Iran in the 1980s, for bringing the Comoros close to a pariah like Iran. And yet tens of thousands of them turned out to welcome Ahmedinejad, standing for hours in a heavy rain to listen to him speak in front of the National Assembly. Comorans forgot their reservations and rejoiced that the visit of a famous Muslim leader had put their country, however momentarily, on the world map. By association, Comorans also praise President Sambi for being important enough to have a world leader, even one so infamous, come visit their tiny, remote country. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Despite a heavy rain, thousands gathered in front of the National Assembly to hear Union of the Comoros President Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi and his "honored guest" Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. While treading carefully on the Sunni-Shi'a issue, Sambi said Comoros had a long historical link to the Arab and Persian world, even claiming linguistic ties between Comoran and Farsi. He said Comorans respect the Islamic importance of Shiraz and even have a mosque, in Domoni on Anjouan, named for that Iranian city. President Sambi congratulated Iran on the 30-year anniversary of the Islamic revolution and praised his counterpart for his "development success" despite the international embargo. Sambi said all Muslims were proud of Iran's accomplishment in launching a satellite. He concluded by calling on Ahmedinejad to give aid to the Comoros.

3. (SBU) President Ahmedinejad announced, "Iran is ready to help Africa, particularly the Comoros, to develop after decades of being pillaged by the west." He denounced the former colonial powers in Africa and said "anything is possible in independent African countries." The Iranian President said his country prospered without expecting anything from the west and called for "Muslim solidarity." Ahmedinejad's speech was interrupted several times by enthusiastic cries of "Allah Akbar" (praise God) from the audience. Notably absent were opposition leaders: Grande Comore island "president" Abdouwahabi and Moheli island "president" Ali Said refused to attend. In a meeting with diplomats February 26 (SEPTTEL), the former said the GOC was careful to decorate Moroni only on the morning of the visit, lest angry Comorans (or the opposition) embarrass Sambi by tearing it all down if they had done so earlier.

4. (SBU) The Iranian President announced he would finance the construction of 2,500 houses in the Comoros (Sambi's "international housing conference" to prepare to build 75,000 low-cost homes took place this week), to provide help repairing generators at the MAMWE electric utility, and to provide "technical" experts in agriculture, development and related fields. The first lady of Iran visited the

el-Marouf Hospital of Moroni, where she reportedly promised financial assistance and materials.

15. (SBU) Sambi himself visited Iran in July, 2008; reportedly the two countries agreed to open Embassies in each other's capitals. In 2006, the Comoros and Iran signed numerous "Memoranda of Understanding" on cooperation that have led to very little. Iran donated a fishing boat that now sits derelict in the port of Moroni. In spring, 2008, Iran promised a large quantity of crude oil; leading the GOC to cancel its supply contract with TOTAL. There were acute fuel and energy shortages in August and September, 2008, while the Comorans found ad hoc petroleum suppliers. The Iranian crude, apparently, did not come with free shipment, had to be transported to Yemen to be refined, and in general does not appear to have been a helpful gift. Iran has also opened a clinic and foundation in Moroni (REFTEL). President Sambi studied in Iran in the 1980s, earning the nickname "Ayatollah," and is believed to have been supported by Iran ever since in his mattress, water, and perfume businesses prior to being elected president of the Union of the Comoros in May, 2006.

16. (SBU) Ahmedinejad's advance team and delegation included dozens of Iranians who took over almost every room at both of Moroni's two international hotels. The day before the President's arrival, his staff were frantically trying to put the program in place, which included a welcome at the airport, speeches at the National Assembly, and a state dinner at the Itsandra Hotel (Note: Interestingly, the Itsandra Hotel is owned by Comoro Gulf Holdings, a "Kuwait-based" investment group led by French-Syrian Bashar Kiwan and financially backed by Kuwaiti Prince Sheikh Sabah. End Note). Comoros Officer was invited to the events honoring Iran's President, but declined due to USG policy.

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17. (SBU) Diplomatic colleagues were summoned to be at the airport at 1400, where they waited for over two hours. President Sambi arrived 10 minutes prior to Ahmedinejad's 1605 landing, obviously aware of the ETA. Tens of thousands of Comorans, most holding small Iranian flags, lined the road from the airport into Moroni. Homemade banners hung all over, "Welcome To Your Country," and "We Are Proud You Launched A Satellite." Diplomats arrived for dinner at 2000, but waited until 2230 for the Presidents to arrive. Ahmedinejad reportedly departed the country sometime after midnight, not staying overnight as was previous thought.

18. (SBU) An African ambassador described the Comoran reaction to Ahmedinejad well: "it's an event." A friendly honorary consul who participated in the events quipped, "it was a day of total chaos." The same consul, a business leader at the chamber of commerce, was surprised to read in today's newspaper that the Iranians wanted to open car factories, fisheries, and other businesses with Iranian investment - to his knowledge the delegation did not meet the private sector.

MARQUARDT